

# ATHEISM

## THE LOGIC OF DISBELIEF



JOSEPH McCABE

SEE SHARP PRESS

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JOSEPH McCABE

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

During its day, the original publisher of this pamphlet, the Haldeman-Julius Company of Girard, Kansas, was the most important publisher of radical materials in the United States. From the founding of his company in 1919 until his early death in 1951, E. Haldeman-Julius published more than 4200 books and pamphlets, with a total press run perhaps exceeding 100 million copies.

One of Haldeman-Julius's most important and most prolific writers was Joseph McCabe, the author of this pamphlet. In regard to Christianity, McCabe was perhaps the most learned atheist writer who ever lived. This was a result of his native gifts and his background—he was a former Catholic priest, fluent in Latin and several other languages, who had taught philosophy and ecclesiastical history in a Catholic college. During his lifetime (1867 – 1956) McCabe translated dozens of books and wrote hundreds of his own books and pamphlets, all on various aspects of history, and a great many on religious topics. Perhaps his most important work was *A Rationalist Encyclopedia*, published in 1950, and of which he was editor.

*Atheism: The Logic of Disbelief* first appeared in 1936 as a Haldeman-Julius “Big Blue Book” (a 5-1/2” X 8-1/2” pamphlet) under the title, *Does Atheism Rest Its Case on Logic?* This version of the pamphlet is similar to the original; we have, however, reset the type to make it more readable.

We're happy to make this enlightening work available again after a decades-long hiatus.

—Chaz Bufe, July 20, 2006

# 1

## What Atheism Is

Two or three years ago I was invited to write a memoir of the late Edward Clodd, who was for many years the leader of the British Rationalists. I admired Clodd, and I was aware that if he had any admiration of me it was very temperate. I was therefore rather amused than surprised to find, as I read the bundles of letters he had written to friends, that he positively disliked my polemical work. It was dogmatic and violent. It was "like a pistol in his ears." Far better the urbane work of William Archer who, unfortunately, ended a few years of slender and elementary service to Rationalism by passing into the crass superstition of Spiritualism, upon which Clodd had expended as much violent language as I had ever used about any religion. And Clodd was far from being the only Rationalist colleague of mine to deplore my methods. The late G.H. Putnam Lankester wrote sour protests to my Rationalist publisher. Others who are actual colleagues of mine as Honorary Associates of the Rationalist Press Association have censured my writings on the history of Christianity as color-blind to every virtue and too exaggerated to be reliable. As to my Christian critics, you can guess the violence of the language in which they scold me for my violent language. So let me preface this defense of the logic of Atheism with, not an apology for, but an explanation of, my method.

Strong language is the recognized auxiliary of a logically weak case. A Roman Catholic or a Baptist apologist, a champion of reactionary political causes, a Mussolini or a Hitler, has to be well acquainted with the more sonorous words of his national dictionary. But strong language may also be so legitimate an expression of sentiments which arise spontaneously from a perfectly logical demonstration that the man who refuses to use it incurs the suspicion of cowardice, and in most cases justly. The prudential plea that disdainful or violent language must alienate the people whose views you want to alter is not a pure product of the experience. For instance, the most influential, most learned, and most respected writer in Spain today is Professor Miguel Unamuno, a veteran of international repute for scholarship and integrity, and this is his description of his manner:

I wish for no other method than that of passion, and when my breast swells with disgust, with repugnance, with grief or scorn, I allow my mouth to speak from the depths of my heart.

The splendid courage with which more than half of Spain has just checked the designs of Gil Robles and his black Jesuits is a sufficient vindication of Unamuno's virile language. Like Unamuno, I decline to be "mellowed" by age. (He is in his 73rd year while I enter upon my 70th in a few months.) For, like Unamuno, I find that the more knowledge I attain the more I realize that the world is still full of untruth and that old creeds still suck the blood of the people in virtue of that untruth.

These reflections arise here because my defense of Atheism as the only entirely logical attitude toward religion is considered one of the symptoms of my hasty and violent disposition. And I coldly reply that my position is based upon a hundred times more knowledge of the relevant facts of science and speculations of philosophy than any of my critics possess; just as my "extreme" verdict upon Christianity—that it grievously hindered instead of promoting the development of civilization—rests upon a hundred times better acquaintance with the historical facts than those have who say that I exaggerate. When journalists, essayists, and preachers who could not pass an elementary examination in these subjects, when men who are learned in some subject but not this, tell us that Atheism and Materialism are superficial, the outcome of imperfect knowledge, or the mere expression of an impetuous temper, one has to say these things. There is another reason. It is just 40 years today (February 19, 1936) since I left the Church of Rome, and these 40 years have been mainly filled with an intense study of all culture that bears upon religion; just as the 12 previous years, as student and professor, had been entirely devoted to the study of religion. Well, in the series which I gave in the *Appeal to Reason* and in this series, I record the supreme lessons of those 52 years or arduous study. I say that religion is in all forms useless, in most forms mischievous, in its Roman form one of the worst forces in the profound reaction which at present menaces civilization; and that materialistic Atheism is the best basis for a reconstruction of life.

## Clerical Travesties

There ought not to be, but there is, a need to begin with a patient study of what Atheism is and is not. The confusion which one finds in encyclopedia articles is in part due to a loose use of the word in earlier ages which might very well be forgotten. The Greeks and Romans, for instance, called the early Christians Atheists because they rejected the pagan gods. On the other hand, while Socrates, who believed in God, was put to death on a

charge of Atheism and the corruption of youth, the far greater majority of the Greek philosophers and their followers, being all Materialists, either rejected God outright or made a merely nominal concession that there might be gods of some sort somewhere or other in the depths of space, yet we are told that there were very few Atheists in ancient Greece. The truth is that the great majority of cultivated men, and many women, in the Greek-Roman civilization were Atheists in the real meaning of the word, since they followed either the Ionics, the Sophists, the Skeptics, or, particularly, the Epicurean and the non-theistic Stoics.

But all this, and the loose use of the word in the 17th and 18th centuries, when any critic of Christianity was apt to be called an Atheist, has nothing to do with what we mean today. At the most it gives certain religious writers the pretext to say that to call oneself an Atheist is meaningless unless you say what god or gods you reject, but we will return to that point presently. First let us set aside the confusion which clerical writers have introduced in order to maintain the popular prejudice against Atheism.

The worst and silliest of these is the attempt to represent Atheism as, at least in a large number of cases—at one time they suggested that it was in the majority of cases—a defiance of God as moral legislator. We still read of “practical Atheism” or “Atheism of the heart” and are told that it means that a man behaves as if there were no God. This sort of stuff is petty and archaic. It smacks of the parochial politics that makes so much of the domestic life of the churches ridiculous. Religious papers recently spoke at length and with much unction about a young murderer who before he was executed returned enthusiastically to the Catholic faith. He had lived, they said, as a “practical Atheist” for years. To give our name to this social scum, to men of perniciously anti-social habits who have been reared in the belief that a deathbed repentance cleans the slate, is stupid. One might just as well give it to the 150 Italian Catholics, of a very holy fraternity, who the other week, when a fire broke out in the restaurant in New York in which they were gorging, fell into such a savage panic that they left five of their number dead and 40 in terrible suffering on the floor of the restaurant. But, of course, they were men and women who went to church regularly, so you would insult them if you called them practical Atheists.

This loose way of thinking or speaking about Atheism is even worse when it is suggested that men contrive to make themselves disbelieve in God in order to indulge more freely in illicit pleasures. The psychology of this is too crude for us to linger in examining it, and the suggestion that a Christian has to persuade himself that he does not believe in God before he can get drunk or seduce a girl is too funny for words, especially when you reflect that his church teaches him that it is a far fouler crime to deny God than to impoverish his family by drink or bring grave trouble upon some uninstructed girl. The whole thing is so silly that I would not waste a paragraph on it but for



the fact that it is used very extensively in all the churches today to create prejudice against Atheists, as the campaign of lies about Russia a few years ago reminds us. At one time it was an entirely respectable Christian thesis. Murray's *Oxford Dictionary*, for instance, supports its quite correct definition of Atheism with this quotation from Gladstone, the most eminent and most cultivated champion of Christianity half a century ago:

By the Atheist I understand the man who not only holds off, like the skeptic, from the affirmation, but who drives himself, or is driven, to the negative assertion in regard to the whole universe, or to the existence of God.

Nothing but the demoralizing effect of the religious atmosphere can explain how a man of such strong intelligence could repeat such an absurdity. Clerics of the better type now ignore this old stratagem. I see with pleasure that in the last edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Canon Shebbeare, a royal chaplain with whom I once had a very pleasant debate, frankly says, in the article "Atheism," that decent behavior is certainly not confined to theists. But Baptists and Catholics still mumble the old stupidity.

More serious is the representation that Atheism is just a defiant gesture of a few immature or imperfectly educated minds. I have earlier quoted Dr. Millikan saying, in a widely read magazine article, that he "never knew a thoughtful man who did not believe in God"; a statement, by the way, of which Dr. Millikan ought, for his own credit, to give some further explanation, seeing that Professor Leuba had shown that, on their own confession, the majority of the greater scientific men of America do not believe in God. If there is one thing more fantastic than another in this controversy about Theism it is for men, whether scientists like Millikan or preachers like John Haynes Holmes, to represent Atheism as a rare attitude and one based upon imperfect study or knowledge. I will here show, in summary, having proved it in detail in a score of larger works, that the position of the typical Atheist is based upon rigorously logical conclusions from a complete knowledge of the relevant fields of science, philosophy, history, and comparative religion, while these "great scientists," whose casual professions of some sort of Theism are eagerly snapped up by the press, betray [through] their own expressions that they are incapable of philosophical reasoning, are grossly ignorant of the history of Christianity and the evolution of religious ideas, and have never made a serious study of the subject.

## Atheism and Agnosticism

This attempt to depreciate Atheism intellectually has been encouraged by Huxley's invention of the word Agnosticism. It became the fashion, for

one reason or another, for men and women of any social or cultural position who abandoned the belief in God to call themselves Agnostics, since for some mysterious reason religious folks tolerate the Agnostic and are rabid against the Atheist. Into this agnostic world I passed when I quit the Church 40 years ago, and until some 10 or more years ago it never even occurred to me to question the accuracy of my description of my position. Every non-Theist I met called himself an Agnostic. I have now seen for many years that the distinction favors superstition, and I have done all in my power, in spite of the hostility of many prominent American and British Atheists, to induce skeptics to call themselves Atheists and Materialists.

It is a mistake to suppose that even the greater part of those who call themselves Agnostics are solely, or chiefly, moved by the comparative respectability of the name. One must admit that that motive counted for much in the mind of Huxley when he invented the name. In one of the many pages in which he explains his purpose (in "Methods and Results"), he distinguishes himself from Atheists on the ground that he considers the question whether God exists or not "hopelessly out of reach of my poor powers," and he speaks of the "senseless babble" of philosophers who profess to prove that there is and "philosophers who try to prove that there is no God." One feels that he ought to have known that there are no such philosophers and that not one Atheist in 10,000 tries to prove that there is no God. In what sense one may essay even this we shall see later, but the group from which Huxley wanted to dissociate himself in the mind of the public, Bradlaugh's group, did not attempt it. Although encyclopedia articles often quote Bradlaugh as the type of what they call "the dogmatic Atheist," his daughter tells us in her biography (I, 87) that "he did not deny that there was a God." Huxley certainly strained matters in order to dissociate himself from the unpopular Bradlaugh group, but we must remember that, though he was a model of lucidity in the exposition of science, he was a very poor philosopher. He based Agnosticism on the Kantist principle that we cannot either by the senses or the pure intellect get beyond the screen of material phenomena, and he then avoided Materialism by adopting the Humist principle—which is really fatal to science and history—that we cannot get beyond our own states of consciousness and know the existence of matter.

Thus, it is Agnosticism in the strict sense—that the mind is so limited that it cannot discuss whether there is or is not a God—that is illogical, and it is now entertained in that form by nobody with whom I am acquainted. Even the distinguished Agnostics of the generation following Huxley with whom I was well acquainted all believed that their minds were perfectly competent to pass judgment on the supposed proofs of the existence of God and emphatically rejected them. Modern Agnostics have—quite innocently—made the additional blunder of saying that they are not Atheists because they do not choose to say there is no God. Few have a larger acquaintance

with them than I have, and I may say that I have never known one of them who "kept an open mind" about the existence of God or thought that possibly there is a God, as religious pedants imagine Agnostics saying. Their quite common attitude is that they are convinced that there is not. Their mistake is that they do not recognize that, according to all the best authorities, the mere lack of actual belief in God is just Atheism.

In "The Militant Atheist" I gave a few definitions and will repeat them here for convenient reference and add to them. The highest authority on the meaning of English words is Murray's *Oxford Dictionary*, and it defines Atheism as "disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of God"; and in support it quotes the passage of Gladstone (Huxley's chief opponent) which I have given. It then defines disbelief as "not to believe," though the point is clear enough from the mere fact that it gives disbelief and denial as two different attitudes. Some might claim equal authority for Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary*. It does not even mention denial, but defines Atheism as "disbelief in the existence of God." Americans may prefer Funk and Wagnall's dictionary or Webster's *New International Dictionary*. They both agree that Atheism is "disbelief in or denial of the existence of God"; and the former quotes Flint, one of the highest Christian authorities of his time, using the word in that sense as early as 1887. To make it still clearer, the same dictionary distinguishes between dogmatic, negative and critical Atheism. The first means positive denial (which is very rare), the third the open mind (which is just as rare), but all three are Atheism—the lack of a positive belief. When I add that the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, the *New Schaff-Herzog* (Protestant) *Encyclopedia*, and even, with all its crudity, the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, give the same definition, it is obviously up to Agnostics to say why they reject the name Atheist. In point of fact, it is only the cheaper dictionaries that confine the name to those who deny; and even these, which are supposed to reflect popular rather than literary usage, are wrong. Nine men out of 10 who ask you if you believe in god will at once say, if you are merely reply No: "Then you are an Atheist."

## The Gods We Reject

Even in the large biography of Bradlaugh by his daughter and the late J.M. Robertson there is a long dissertation of the argument that a man cannot call himself an Atheist unless he defines clearly the god in whom he refuses to believe; and encyclopedia articles are apt to insist on this point. It is really not a point of the least importance. In what are called Christian lands every child knows that the man who calls himself an Atheist means that he does not believe in the existence of either the Christian or the Jewish God. He rejects the Modernist conception of God just as decisively as the Baptist conception. To say that his position is ambiguous because he does not say whether or no

he rejects the god of some obscure Hindu sect or Brahmanic philosophy is trivial. In Mohammedan lands, similarly, the Atheist is the man who rejects the God of Islam, whether Sunni or Shia.

The only serious point that might here be raised is whether the man who, say in America, calls himself an Atheist must define his attitude to the new gods of the cultured gentlemen who imagine that Demos really needs and wants a god and offer him various new conceptions. We have just examined the new Gods of Professor Dewey and Professor Montague. Then there is the God of Professor Ames, and others: a sort of symbol of the idealistic forces of the race, a "soul of humanity." H.G. Wells at one time supported this, but in his autobiography he hints that he has returned to the "sturdy Atheism" of his youth. There is the God of Professor Einstein—the Power (with a top hat) of the universe—of Dr. Millikan, of G.B. Shaw (the Vital Principle), of Sir Arthur Eddington (the friend who talks to you as casually as one he meets at the club), and so on. For my part I have examined and rejected all these, but to say that no man can call himself an Atheist until he has done so is preposterous. We dismiss all these God-ideas with a quite legitimate distinction: in some cases, as when Dr. Millikan and Professor Montague postulate a cosmic mind or intelligence, we say that they are offering us an imaginary [entity], the evidence for which we have repeatedly torn to shreds; in other cases (Ames, Dewey, etc.), they are attempting to transfer the name God to a real entity to which it has not the least legitimate or useful application.

So we will not waste time over this point. The Atheist rejects every conception of God. If you ask him to give the name to the universe or any real part of it, he denies both the legitimacy and the usefulness of doing such a thing. To put it differently, he emphatically rejects the proposal to transfer the name God to nature or any element of it, and he rejects the belief in any sort of deity that is supposed to be distinct from, however much it may be intermingled with, nature. Pantheism may or may not be, as Schopenhauer said, "Atheism in a top hat," but its God is rejected by the Atheist as emphatically as Jehovah, Allah, or God the Father. Our case is built on logic. The cases of these philosophical critics is based upon verbiage and calculation.

## 2

# The Logic of Disbelief

Popular Atheism, the Atheism of the tens of millions who now in every large civilization tell you that they "do not believe in God," is often said to be based upon a fallacy. After the Great War many clerical writers sourly complained that it had led to a rapid growth of Atheism and that the ground of this was illogical. The problem of evil, they said, was not new, and the war had introduced no new principle. To reject belief in God on that ground was, they insisted, superficial and irrational, since, conceivably, God might have some obscure reason for permitting the prevalence and power of evil. But though the minds of the general uneducated public do not usually proceed on the lines of logic, in this case they were logical enough. If the world presents to us very formidable evidence suggesting that it has no divine ruler or director, but is left to chance developments, and if there is on the other side nothing in it to suggest that it is divinely controlled, Atheism is the logical attitude. Vaguely, and without any approach to the stateliness of syllogistic reasoning, that is the position of the popular Atheist who never reads books on the subject.

In this essay, however, I am examining the Atheism of those who have read the literature of both sides and accept the position as it is presented by atheistic writers. And the logic of the ordinary Atheist, of the overwhelming majority of Atheists, who examine the evidence and simply conclude that there is no proof that any sort of God or Spirit exists, is so clearly correct that I may dismiss it in a very short chapter. You cannot examine except in a logical way something that purports to be a logical proof. We have in an earlier essay of this series actually had to rebut the charge that Atheists are purely intellectual and are apt to starve the emotions for the sake of logic. And if a man points out to us that reasoning may be sound or unsound, logical or sophistical, I have only to refer him to the first and second essays of this series or the last two volumes of my *Rise and Fall of the Gods*. We there had no difficulty in proving that the sophistry is entirely on the side of the Theist, and is flagrant, while the weapon with which the Atheist clears away his sophistry is simply critical reason proceeding as logically as it does in any department of thought. All this we have already seen, and one or two summary observations will suffice here.

## The God of Demos and the "Smystics"

The first is that, as I have often explained though few still seem to appreciate this important point, the evidence on which nine-tenths of the believers in God base their acceptance is, and has been for decades, declared by our highest authorities on reasoning, our philosophers, to be completely illogical. Not one of the great line of German thinkers who inaugurated modern philosophy—Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer—admitted to the validity of arguments for the existence of God from the supposed order and beauty of nature or the need of a first cause and prime mover. Nine-tenths of our modern students and teachers of philosophy agree with them. It is rare and eccentric for one to argue, as Professor Montague does, that the orderliness of nature points to the existence of some singular sort of deity who uses the stars of the material universe as the cells of his stupendous brain. These few deviations from the settled philosophic tradition are not taken seriously by Theists, and they betray a remarkable ignorance of the teaching of science, of which any primer would tell Professor Montague that stars have a temperature of 3,000 to 50,000 degrees Celsius at the surface and hundreds of millions of degrees in the interior.

On the other hand, the majority of scientific mystics, or "Smystics," who profess to believe in God betray an equal ignorance of the verdict of philosophy on their arguments. The late Professor Pupin's valiant demonstration that there is an "integrating factor" in nature is an adulteration of very good science—as far as the physical section goes—with very poor philosophy. Dr. Osborn, like Sir O. Lodge, seems to accept the design-argument as ingenuously as a young student in a Baptist seminary, and Dr. Millikan's contention that because there are love and mind and beauty in the world about us they must have been there from the beginning is a sort of reasoning at which even a biologist, to say nothing of a philosopher, would smile. Still worse is the position of Professor Whitehead, Sir A. Eddington, and Sir J. Jeans, who are led by their line of reasoning to the patently absurd conclusion that there is no material universe.

Thus to accuse the Atheist who rejects the arguments and conclusions of these men of a lack of logic is sheer willfulness. The religious writer is here in the position of the smart Christian lady who tried—and with great success as far as the contemporary Jesuits were concerned—to ridicule the mechanical philosophy of Descartes. "You put together a machine called a dog," she said, "and a machine called a bitch, and you presently get a little machine called a puppy." With that miserable piece of sophistry, confusing a rigid metallic machine with a colloid organization like the body of an animal, apologists have continued to this day to assail the mechanical conception of life,

but there is now not one physiologist in 10 who does not say that Descartes was right and his critic's smart saying merely a superficial appeal to the imagination.

The fallacy of "the great scientist who believes in God" is merely another example of the utter lack of logic on the religious side. Few of the Smystics are, as a matter of fact, "great scientists." Lodge, Osborn, Pupin, Arthur Thomson, MacBride, and Conklin are decidedly not in that category. Millikan, Eddington, Jeans, Lord Rayleigh, and Sir W. Bragg are scientific men of high distinction, though one may doubt if the future will put them in the select category of great scientists. But I have not the least idea of detracting from the prestige of any of them. The important point is that a man of high distinction in science can no more pass a sound judgment in other fields of culture without adequate study than a distinguished theologian or artist can give a sound judgment in matters of science. The lucid and disciplined mind can no more dispense with the material of judgment—knowledge of the relevant facts—than the common mind can. Modern literature is full of this fallacy of the distinguished authority. Great mathematicians are starred in our magazines as authorities on God when their own words make it clear that they have thought very little about the subject. Physicists pronounce dogmatically on the nature of life and talk glibly about emergent evolution, or, like Millikan, assure the world arrogantly that the teaching of Jesus was unique, though they have hardly read a line of other Greek literature of that age or of the older portion of the Talmud. Literary critics, who never study anything except each other, pass as authorities on the utility (or the reverse) of science, the value of Christianity, or the soundness of Socialism. So good a man as Sir Arthur Keith was led a few years ago to glorify war, and just recently Professor Julian Huxley has made certain feeble concessions as regards psychic phenomena which have given joy to British Spiritualists.

Against all this the Atheist demands respect for logic and mental sanity. To come to an entirely reasonable conclusion in regard to the existence of God you need as much special study, as much positive knowledge, as you do if you want a substantial opinion in regard to credit control or the value of tariffs. The Atheist of little leisure gets this by reading some of the many manuals on the subject written by competent authorities, on both sides, but I do not know a single one of these Smystics—and I believe I have read the works of all of them—who has given proof that he has ever read any recognized atheistic writer. Even when they refer, as few do, to Hacckel's *Riddle of the Universe*, I have by careful checking discovered that they—with the single exception of Lodge—have never read it. Their opinions about religion are the product of superficial thinking in an idle hour or are mere reflections of the shoddy literature published by apologists or—more probably—of the laudatory notices of such literature in the press. It takes one's breath away to find these men described as profound, serious, rigorously logical thinkers on

religion and their atheistic critics swept aside as superficial, frivolous, and sophistical.

## The God of the Philosophers

And that this is a sound verdict is abundantly proved by the fact that, as I have already mentioned and have shown in detail in my *Rise and Fall of the Gods*, philosophers have nothing but disdain for the theistic arguments (design, causation, etc.) of religious Demos and his Smystics. They are so nearly unanimous about it and have agreed for so long a time that many Protestant theistic writers have surrendered their criticisms. The Catholic apologist Dr. Sheen gives in his *Religion Without God* (p. 178) a number of quotations from Protestant theistic writers who say, as Professor Beckwith does, that the familiar old arguments are "widely discredited," or that, as another says, "none is now so intellectually poor as to do them reverence"—a quaint statement, seeing that at least four-fifths of Christians are taught that those are the grounds for believing in God. Dr. Sheen goes so far as to say that "the Catholic church practically stands alone today in insisting on the power of reason to prove God." It takes a Catholic to be proud of himself or his church standing alone, disdained by the whole intellectual world. With all the ease and complacency of a Fundamentalist lecturer (his spiritual cousin) defying the whole of science, he dismisses the judgment of all the professors of philosophy in the world as a trifle and hugs his "Catholic philosophy," which is so moldy a medieval relic that modern manuals or histories of philosophy never mention it.

It is, of course, totally false that the design argument, first cause argument, etc., "now do but gather dust in our libraries," as William James said, or "stalk about with the unsubstantiality of ghosts," as a Protestant theologian says. Not only every Catholic apologist and the overwhelming majority of the Protestant apologists and preachers still urge people to regard them as sound, but the few of the "great scientists" who believe in God and condescend to tell us why they do so rely on those discredited arguments. On the other hand, the theistic philosophers who reject these old arguments put before us other arguments which a student of science recognizes to be just as invalid. As I told in the second essay of this series, the apologists for God who refuse to regard design, order, beauty, beauty, or causation on nature as evidence of his existence have two lines of reasoning. The philosophers and the few divines who have philosophical culture take the line that there is a world of values, especially moral values, which is quite distinct from the material universe, including man, and that our intuitions of this spiritual world compel us to postulate God as its author or groundwork. I have shown that the science of ethics, which proves that all that is sound in moral law is



social law and has been as gradually evolved from crude beginnings as ordinary civil or criminal law, completely discredits their claim that they have intuitions into a transcendental world. Quite apart from Behaviorism or the Gestalt theory of the mind, the modern psychologist rules out intuitions as disdainfully as he rules out free will or instinct.

It will seem to some incredible that the members of this most cultivated group of Theists, the theistic philosophers (about one in five or six of our philosophers generally), should defy science, or ignore it, almost as flagrantly as the Fundamentalist does. The explanation is, of course, that few philosophers closely follow the progress of science, and they are unaware that the development of a scientific ethics and psychology has left them stranded on the beach. That this is in fact their position—the position of those philosophers who believe in God, for the majority today are Atheists—I have earlier shown by quotations, and the reader who has not access to their books will find my statement fully confirmed in the article "Theism" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, the chief authority on this matter. Not only are their starting point (the transcendent nature of values) and their techniques (intuitions) scientifically discredited, but their reasoning is, for philosophers, loose, illogical, and often no more than verbiage. All thinking becomes tainted when it is pressed into the service of religious apologetics.

If this is the plight of the philosophical Theists, we know what to expect of those believers in God who know neither philosophy nor science yet think it dishonest, or at least dangerous, to continue to use the old popular "proofs of the existence of God." They are driven, as I have told, to the desperate expedient of telling folk that if they have a vivid conviction that God exists they need no proof. One does not need to invoke science to show that a vivid conviction testifies only to the fact that you have that conviction. Logic is flung to the winds in this latest defense of the God-idea, and, when its champions go on to talk about religious instincts, senses, or intuitions, they defy psychology as audaciously as the Baptist defies geology.

### 3

## The Logic of Denial

The charge that the Atheist is not logical begins to look humorous. The theistic body which he confronts is broken into fragments of which each calls the arguments of the other illogical, and all present to us as arguments a superficial mess of verbiage and sophistry. The jibe at the intellectual quality of Atheism was never more than a trick of the clerical trade, innocently adopted at times by lay writers, but it is today so ridiculous that any man who seriously repeats it must define an Atheist as the best authorities, we saw, do not.

Two hundred years ago Atheists were as rare as albinos. One hundred years ago they were still rare, though in Britain they included men of such intellectual distinction as Jeremy Bentham, the greatest jurist of his time, Grote, one of the leading historians, and Lord Palmerston. At that time, however, Theists were still so united in their faith in the design argument and men of distinction were so overwhelmingly believers in God that, especially as the men I have just named concealed their opinions or published them in a false name, it was plausible to jeer at Atheism. Today, when at least four-fifths of the world's leading intellectual workers (philosophers, scientists, and historians) are Atheists in the authoritative meaning of the word, when the majority of all people of college education are Atheists, when it is only the uneducated or imperfectly educated class that you get, possibly, a majority of believers, any expression of doubt as to which position is logical, the Theist or the Atheist, is either folly or prejudice. That Mr. Upton Sinclair should choose just this hour of the world to repeat the jibe at Atheism is one of the eccentric happenings of our abnormal time.

It has now become common enough for theistic writers that what the dictionaries call the negative Atheist is quite logical. He may be described as melancholy, dangerous, selfish, or what you like, but his fault is that he exaggerates the importance of logic. The same writers, however, continue to repeat the parrot-cry that what the dictionaries call the positive Atheist—the man who denies the existence of God—is quite illogical, and we will devote the remainder of this essay to proving that he is, on the contrary, quite logical and his critics are as superficial as usual. Their basic principle, that you

cannot prove a negative, is false. If the wife awakens you in the middle of the night with the alarm that there is a burglar downstairs, you can easily prove a negative—that there is not [a burglar]. We do not remain agnostic as to whether or no there was once a universal deluge. We prove that there was not. The astronomer can prove that there is no solid firmament, no unknown planet between, say, Mercury and Neptune, not menace in a comet's tail. We have proved the negative in regard to hundreds of old beliefs, and it is a point for serious consideration whether we cannot do so in regard to the existence of God.

## Two Millennia of Futile Search

The whole fallacy of this charge of irrationality against the positive Atheist lies in the ambiguity of the word "proof," and it is that ambiguity alone which restrains many of us from saying that we are positive Atheists. The point may be well illustrated by a distinction which theistic writers themselves now often use. They say that they can "prove," but not "demonstrate," the existence of God. In other words, they recognize very different degrees in the value of proof. They say that they can, for instance, offer you a very reasonable ground for accepting the existence of God, although it is not a rigorous proof like the proof that the sun is 93,000,000 miles away. They have, of course, not even reasonable grounds of this sort today, but it is enough here to note that statements may be made or accepted on reasonable grounds without incurring any charge of illogicality.

And the grounds on which a man says that there is no God are immeasurably more respectable intellectually than any grounds on which we are asked today to believe that there is a God. I have not in any previous work done more than refer briefly to this aspect of the subject and will here give two chapters to it. Let me first meet a possible misunderstanding. I have said that the positive Atheist is comparatively rare, and that may seem strange if the grounds of the positive atheistic position are quite so reasonable. But we have seen also that the attitude of Atheists generally is not that they keep an open mind as to whether there is or is not a God and simply say that the evidence they have seen is not valid. On the ground of an exceptionally wide experience I say that quite generally the Atheist is convinced that there is no God but he does not go beyond examining the theistic evidence that is put before him and rejecting it. He rarely gives much attention to the grounds of positive Atheism which we will now examine.

Not the least substantial of these is the fact that during the two millennia of history of which we have a good knowledge there has been an intense search for evidence of the existence of God, and it has been wholly futile. I say two millennia roundly, but 2,500 years ago Theists were struggling against skeptics in colonial Greece, India (where Atheism grew rapidly), and

China; and there is ample evidence that the clash occurred in the educated world of Egypt at least a millennium before that. However, at least from the time of the earliest schools of Greek philosophy skepticism about God has grown with the intellectual development of every country, and the mystically inclined have sought on all sides for evidence. In the Greek-Roman and the Arab-Persian lands the expression of Atheism was often checked by fear of the religious mob, but it is easy to see where an atheistic philosopher meets this by making some verbal concession like that of Epicurus, who, while a strong opponent of the prevailing superstition, said that there might be beings whom you could call gods in some remote and unapproachable part of the universe.

However, my point here is that from 2500 B.C. onward believers in God have been confronted with serious skepticism and they have been compelled to formulate the reasons for their belief in the guise of arguments as evidence. From the 5th Century B.C. onward the familiar argument that the order and beauty of nature imply that it is ruled by a cosmic intelligence has been generally used by Theists. From the 17th Century A.D. there has been in Europe a slow and steady growth of Atheism and this led at once to an increase of defenses of the God-idea against Atheists. For a century or so the Deists were as zealous in this work as the Christian theologians, but the spread of the scientific attitude toward nature, the rise of philosophers like Kant who exposed the shallowness of the supposed proofs, and the more critical feeling about the churches which the new social zeal created prepared the way for the greatest atheistic advance that has been known in history. For the last 50 years or more Theists have been on the defensive, and today they have, if they know and acknowledge the world situation, rather to apologize for clinging to a belief belonging to the infancy of the race which the great majority of properly educated folk have abandoned.

As a result we have, ignoring the works of ancient or medieval philosophers, an enormous literature professing to prove the existence of God. If, again, we ignore popular stuff written by verbose preachers and the hopelessly out-of-date stuff written by Catholic writers, we still have for the last 100 years hundreds of, if not more than a thousand, apologetic works by men of ability from Paley and Martineau, Gladstone, Fiske, Flint and Le Conte, to the 50 or more recent writers whose works I examined in my *Rise and Fall of the Gods*. This literature, from Plato's essays to the last dilettante effort of an American professor to give some sort of vitality to the expiring God-idea, means that a very large part of the genius of the race has been absorbed in the search for traces of God and has found none.

Sophistry is so endemic in this field that we shall find some protesting that this search itself, spread over two or three millennia, is significant. We get poetry about God as the Great Magnet drawing the hearts of men, and so on. It is very obvious to retort that this argument, if it were serious, would

invest God with a new cruelty. An idealistic being who inspired such a search yet made it so futile by revealing no traces of himself would be a new form of a torturing God. But, of course, it is sheer rhetoric. Religious writers sometimes quote this passage from Romanes' *Candid Examination of Theism* (1878):

When at times I think, as think at times I must, of the appalling contrast of the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine and the lonely mystery of existence as I now find it—at such times I shall ever feel it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is susceptible.

This, whatever the explanation—and Romanes' lapse into incurable invalidism a few years later gives you the clue—is so notoriously exceptional that only quite unscrupulous apologists dare represent it as even a fairly common sentiment of Atheists. There is no thirst for God, and no man or woman is distressed at parting with the belief. Indeed, nearly the whole literature of theistic apologetics today comes from theologians and preachers who are obviously trying to maintain the belief in God in the interest of their churches. Hardly any work that is worth serious study is now written on the subject by a layman. The genuine search for God is over. It has ended in a complete disappointment.

## The Godless Universe

In the first flush of scientific discovery many felt that the arguments for the existence of God were so confirmed that there could not again be any notable spread of Atheism. Since astronomy was one of the first branches of science to make progress, even the Deists drew upon it for evidence of the rule of God over nature. The solar system, with its settled orbits and perfect regularity seemed to them a giant mechanism designed by a giant or infinite engineer. When zoology and botany then began to describe the remarkable organization of plants and animals—the ingenious way in which organs were constructed to perform their functions, the remarkable adaptations of organs to different environments, etc.—this sentiment deepened. It was the ancient Greeks who had first insisted that nature was so orderly that it must be ruled by mind. Yet they had a very poor idea of the real orderliness of nature. When science, in the latter part of the 19th Century, traced this orderliness and ingenuity in the frames of animals and plants, the basis of Theism seemed to be broader and more solid than ever.

The discovery of evolution shattered all this complacency. From the first the clergy saw the cloven hoof, and they continued to rail against the truth long after it had been scientifically established. With the plea of the liberals

who at last began to accept it and graft it upon the theological tree—the plea that it provided a “grander conception of creation”—we need not linger. That phrase was silly and insincere from the start. A God whose power is such that at his mere wish our material universe springs in to existence with all its populations may or may not be a grand conception, but to say that it is grander to believe in a God who becomes something like Shaw’s Vital Principle, guiding molecules into position and taking a billion years to get life to the stage of the snail and the starfish, is nonsense. Between Kant and Darwin, philosophy and science, the venerable design argument was in ruins by the end of the 19th Century. Here and there fat elderly scientific men like Arthur Thompson and MacBride, Osborn and Haldane, were still poking about amongst the biological phenomena which were not yet explained and claiming that any scientific obscurity was just a luminous proof of the existence of God, while Lodge, Conklin, and others pleaded that the constructive agencies of nature could not have produced such noble beings as the Ape-Man of Java in so short a space of time as 1,500 million years unless they were divinely directed. It all looks very tawdry today. Some still have the courage to quote Pope’s line, “A little learning is a dangerous thing.” But it was the very imperfect scientific learning of a hundred years ago that gladdened the hearts of the theologians. The full dose of its learning is arsenic to them.

It was sometimes said in explanation of the claim that “creation by evolution” was a grander conception than the old idea of a sudden creation out of nothing of a completely formed nature that it showed the creator “acting by means of the laws of nature.” It is, of course, open to theologians to propose to give a new meaning to ancient words like creation (which means and always meant in theology the instantaneous production of something complete without antecedent stages or, as it was usually said, out of nothing), but to say that they still held the theological doctrine of creation was not honest. And their position was worse on the scientific side. “Laws of nature” are not a code prescribed for the behavior of things but a description of the ways in which things actually behave. Still worse was the notion that some spiritual intelligence could guide the case of evolution. When you are rude enough to press the apologist to use plain English and to go into detail, you get an amazing suggestion of the molecules of plasm in the body of a plant or animal having a “divine plan” communicated to them in a mysterious way and cooperating, like mechanics in an automobile factory, to construct a heart, an eye, or a kidney. It is childish.

Moreover, the Theist had then to ignore hundreds of features of the course of evolution which positively exclude the idea of design and guidance. In the evolution of the horse, for instance, we have a vast family of more or less “horsey” forms spreading from a common root during millions of years of Tertiary time. One of these becomes the horse; the hundreds of other species die out. In the evolution of man we have the same thing. First

there is a very wide spread of types of anthropoid apes, only four of which survive, while one only develops in the direction of man. Still for a million years nature goes on striking false notes, so to say, or evolving semi-human or human types from which the modern race certainly does not descend. This kind of waste, blundering, and stumbling characterizes the course of evolution from beginning to end. It suggests exactly the reverse of plan and intelligent guidance. It is godless, and particularly in the part of it which we know best: the evolution of the mammals during the Tertiary Era and of man in the Quaternary. Any man who knows well the paleontological record of the myriads of doomed, abortive types does not simply say to himself that here is no evidence of a planning and guiding mind: he says that such an idea is positively excluded.

I gave as a simple illustration of the possibility of proving a negative the fact that you can prove beyond question that there is not a burglar (or other person) in a particular room. In the same way the exist[ence] of such a being as the churches and other Theists claim ought to be seen in some sort of guidance of the human race and perceived by the eye of the historian. But modern history is notoriously and completely godless. It is even more bloody and blundering than the record of half the higher mammals of the Tertiary Era. It is still pitilessly, transparently godless. The theistic apologist is reduced to claiming a divine section in the remote and hopelessly obscure past when life first appeared or in the imperfectly known ages which succeeded. The later you proceed in the record of life and the ampler our evidence of the record is, the more emphatically godless it turns out to be. The sensitive Theists who nervously decline to find God in the monstrous combats of Jurassic dinosaurs or Cretaceous sharks and ask us to see the evidence of plan in the final product, ourselves, now look round a world that suffers profoundly from economic stupidity and shudders under the menace of an appalling war. And their God is most invoked in the plague-areas of the world, while Atheism is generally the creed where fragments of the race retain their sanity and work to build a better order. The logic is very decidedly on the side of the positive Atheist, yet we have as yet seen only half his evidence.

## 4

# History of the God Idea

It would be possible to write, on the lines I followed in the last chapter, a treatise of positive Atheism as voluminous as and much more solid than those pretentious theistic apologies which rich religious endowments have called into existence all through the last 100 years. Unfortunately, no one endows Atheism, though it is already clear that the atheistic mind is best fitted of all for undertaking constructive work. But I have in earlier works given a good deal of the evidence and these chapters must be regarded as summaries or outlines.

The outcome of it all is that to take up the position of a positive Atheist is perfectly reasonable and logical and, I repeat, it is really the general attitude of Atheists. Hilaire Belloc once pressed me, in the days when I called myself an Agnostic, to say exactly what my frame of mind was. "Logically," I said, "I am an Agnostic; psychologically, an Atheist." He quite understood that I referred here simply to the difference between negative and positive Atheism: that, while I preferred to call myself an Agnostic—I had, curiously enough, at that time never looked up the word Atheist in a single dictionary—I was quite convinced that there is no God. He told me that was, in his experience, the general attitude of Agnostics.

The evidence I here lightly outline wholly justifies that attitude. It is, I suppose, possible to conceive a God or power of some sort that has no relation whatever to our universe or to man. Of such a God we should naturally find and expect no trace, and, though one might call the idea arbitrary or absurd one could not take up the attitude of positive Atheism. But no one affirms or seriously suggests that such a God exists, for, from the nature of the case, no ground whatever for affirming it is conceivable. The God of all religions, and of all the philosophers and scientists who offer us Gods without the vicious associations of clericalism, is a God whose existence is supposed to be guaranteed by his action upon nature or upon some part of the life of man. We quite logically retort that there is no such God. We can trace the life of the Earth back for 2,000 million years; we can in the condition of stars and universes whose light has been traveling to us for millions of years see nature as it was in those appalling distances of time; and in the vivid



experience of our own time we should, if there were any, catch even the faint traces of a supernatural agency.

Not only do we find none, but we find, as I said, features everywhere which positively exclude the idea. We find nature blundering along with portentous slowness during hundreds of millions of years during which its features are repugnant to a high type of mind. We find agencies at work moving life onward and upward—carnivorous populations, often of monstrous shape, deadly convulsions of earth itself, etc.—which, if one imagines them to have been deliberately chosen, would suggest an arch-devil rather than a God. We find in every age swarms of blood-sucking or blood-poisoning parasites, from bacteria to worms, which, on the theistic hypothesis, God must have directed the molecules of plasm to produce just as he is supposed to have directed them to produce the human eye or the orchid. Nature is the negation of God, now that science gives us the key to the natural explanation of its processes. Life today is the negation of God; for all that is good in it, all that tends to relieve it of its age-old weariness and suffering, is the work of man. Progress is the negation of God; for just where the race makes most progress it is the most atheistic. We have found that there is no burglar—or ghost—in the house. We have “proved” the negative with immeasurably better logic than any Theist ever proved the affirmative. And we are not yet at the end of the evidence.

## The Growth of Superstition

We quite commonly prove the emptiness of some old belief or superstition by tracing its origin and development. Thus the idea, which is still held by tens of millions of people, that the earwig is an insect with a proneness to bore into the human ear when a man is lying on the ground in the country is simply due to the fact that its rudimentary hind wings are curiously ear-shaped, and it was probably originally called the ear-wing. The supposed efficacy of the horse-shoe and some other objects in driving away devils—not in “bringing in good luck,” which is a modern sophistication—is due to its crude resemblance in contour to the female organ. There were until quite recent times churches in Ireland with a carving of a nude squatting figure of a woman over the door to keep out the devils. Holy wells, in which Catholics still believe in many parts of Europe, are relics of primitive days when good spirits dwelt in every well and kept up the supply of water. The death-watch superstition grew out of the simple fact that, while the timber houses of the old days were commonly very noisy, the silence when a man was dying caused all to notice the “tick” of the beetles which usually passed unnoticed. Hundreds of old superstitions are thus so clearly understood by their origin that we do not trouble to ask about the evidence of them.

The God-belief arose in exactly the same way and is of no more value than these. I have not very much respect for the science of comparative religion, which mingles far too much mysticism and uncritical respect for religion with its science, but it does represent religion as in its origin a reaction of the densely ignorant and childish mind of primitive man to his surroundings. There is far too much speculation and far too little strict attention to the facts of anthropology in this section of the science. The fashionable theory is that a vague awe or emotional reaction to the movement of nature preceded definite animism in the mind of early man. I hold that this is not in accord with what we know about the psychology of the most primitive man, which is incapable of general or abstract ideas, and what we know in anthropology about the religious ideas of the lowest peoples. It seems to me certain that the belief that man has a double or spirit, which admittedly preceded the belief in gods, was a childish attempt to explain concrete phenomena in nature; and chief amongst these, possibly the first to intrigue the mind of the primitive being when he rose above the purely animal level, was the shadow cast by his body in sunlight or the reflection of it on smooth water. But, whatever theory we prefer, the lower savage world of today shows that, before there was any belief in gods, prehistoric man came to believe in the existence around him of large numbers of shadowy beings, sometimes friendly but often (especially at night) malevolent, who were the surviving shadows of his dead fellows.

It is further admitted that the elevation of some of these to the dignity of godhead was a very gradual and natural development. It was just a reflection in the shadow-world of social changes in the world of the living. The lowest people had no chiefs; therefore such of them as believed in spirits—not all did—recognized no outstanding spirits in the shadow-world. At the next or Australian level the spirit world reflects the growing inequality of the living world. The next step is to have definite chiefs, and their shadows remain chiefs after death. In short, no one can say exactly when the spirit of a man who has been in life a little more powerful or cunning than his neighbors becomes a godlet and then a god. It is as gradual as the development of some elder in the community into a chief and then a petty king. And, since the mind of prehistoric man continues to develop during this time and begins to speculate on nature, very powerful spirits are imagined as the senders of rain, wind, sunshine, fire, and so on. The great spirits of gods of the sky, sun, moon, winds, rivers, thunder, mountains, vegetation, etc., are added to the defined ancestors.

Differences of detail in speculating about this development do not matter here. The broad truth is that this belief, which came to dominate the lives of men, was an illusion from first to end. The logic of it was as ingenuous as that of the Australian tribes who think that, as frivolous people have been wont to jest from the days of the Romans to our own, the shower of rain

means that the deity is making water, or that a snowfall means that geese are being plucked in heaven. It was all as empty and baseless as the superstition about the horseshoe or the Chinese firecracker or any of the weird practices for fertilizing the earth. And if you ask why this particular superstition proved so much more tenacious than the others, the answer is that in time it became the bread-ticket of vast corporations of priests, and these and the kings and noble cooperated to dupe or bully the people. So even in civilized society the tendency was to sublimate it and make the gods more or less humanly respectable. But the end, in an age of increasing knowledge and freedom, is already in sight. Most of the other superstitions I have mentioned merely required a little checking by experience to discredit them. Even such beliefs as that in a flat earth and a solid firmament did not require much science to make an end of them. But the God-idea had become an interpretation of the whole nature, especially of the most obscure processes, and man could go on making ingenious defenses of it until science was so far advanced that we could trust it in time to explain the whole of reality. From prehistoric time onward the God-idea was no more than an illusion, a sophism based upon imperfect knowledge. There never was any reality corresponding to it.

## God and the Gods of Savagery

That this positive-atheistic conclusion—the phrase is clumsy, but I must use it for the sake of cleanness—is logical and decidedly reasonable is now clear. Ask the delicate professor or literary man who calls himself an Agnostic and finds positive Atheism blatant whether he believes in ghosts: the kind of spirits which a few generations ago everybody believed to haunt cemeteries and houses in which murder had been committed. If he is quite candid, he will admit that he is certain that there are no ghosts. As soon as critical inquiry began, the ghosts and houses disappeared like bubbles on the surface of a stream, and for the last 50 years every alleged case has proved illusory or fraudulent. We tell scared children, and we really believe, that “there are no such things as ghosts.” It is the same with fairies, elves, dragons, mermaids, wizards, devils, and hosts of other things in which our fathers believed, the search has been exhaustive, and we say emphatically that they do not exist. Well, nature was a haunted house to the primitive mind, but we have searched every corner of it and found it empty. One does not admire the logic of those who find it reasonable to say that there are no ghosts, devils, fairies, dragons or vampires but unreasonable to say that there is no God. The one is just as logical as the other.

There is another and even more impressive way of considering the matter. Dr. Millikan or John Haynes Holmes imagines a fully conscious God placidly observing the religious antics and crimes of men for some tens of thousands of years. He was so intensely interested in our universe that he

guided the atoms of matter to make every pretty shell and flower, but he was quite indifferent to the altars that stank with human flesh over half the earth and the terror that priests and witch doctors put into the hearts of men. Or are we to suppose that this guidance of the molecules of matter is confined to the making of pretty flowers and feathers, which existed for vast periods of time before there was any esthetic sense to appreciate them, while the molecules of the brain of man were left free to blunder into all sorts of absurd and criminal conceptions of God himself? As far as we can estimate from the analogy of savage practices, human sacrifice began thousands of years before the dawn of history; and in the oldest traditions of nearly every civilization there are traces that they kept the practice almost until they entered history. Little more than 2,000 years ago the furnaces of Moloch were, from Palestine to the coast of Spain, choked with the blood of children, and the sacred fools of Yucatan drowned annual bebies of maids in the flower of life. A thousand years ago the teocalli of Mexico were red with the blood of thousands of men, while even later the marketplaces of Europe stank with the scorching flesh of men, women, and children who, as heretics or witches, had incurred the wrath of God. Still tens of thousands of Catholic maids are sacrificed annually, even in America, under the illusion that God requires virginity and fasting of them. Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man* is but a fragmentary record of all the crimes against humanity that have been committed in the name of God, for to all these more drastic crimes add the millions who have been tortured, often to insanity, by priestly stories of the wrath of God, the millions of parents who have imagined their children in hell, the world-wide suffering from the illusion that God demanded asceticism, and so on.

The "reduction to absurdity" has always been recognized as a logical argument, and this aspect of the story of man surely reduces the God-belief to an absurdity. The apologists for it have been driven to the most desperate devices to meet the pressure of the argument. They talk of God as a wise schoolmaster who adapts his lessons to the age of his pupils or makes himself known to the human race by what is called "progressive revelation": one of the new absurdities invented by our superior modern Theists as an escape from the old absurdities. Of course, we must not press the idea. We must not say that in that case God inspired certain tribes of Australian aboriginals to think that when it thundered he was scratching his buttocks. We must not ask whether the extremely phallic early religion of the Hebrews, treasuring stone models of the male organ and taking oaths by laying your hand on your neighbor's genitals, was an infant-school lesson by the celestial teacher, and whether, when the Hebrews got out of the infant-school, he inspired his priests to dance round his altars and howl imprecations at the rival priests of Baal or to believe that he punished their unbelieving neighbors with bloody piles on their bottoms . . . And, to cap it all, he now sends missionaries to give the full-blown idea of himself even to the lowest savages.

It is too stupid to consider seriously. The history of the God-idea itself tells us that there is no God. If you are going to back out of the last step of any logical argument by saying that there might be some unknown factor, some mysterious motive, in the way, it is no use arguing about anything. On the plain lines of logic and common sense the monstrosities that have been perpetrated in the name of God during thousands of years prove that there is no God who could have stopped them. But our modern Theists want us to believe in a God who perceives and can direct every thought in every human mind, if not the movement of every atom in the universe. You may, of course, have it both ways, but you then cast logic to the winds. The logic is on the side of the positive Atheists. An agnostic position, in the strict sense, is in face of such facts, remarkably like the position of the Pope on the Ethiopian War.

## 5

# Atheism of the Heart

Although this is merely a short summary of atheistic reasoning, and it could easily be expanded into a volume much more substantial than one of those volumes of endowed apologetic lectures annually delivered at British and American universities, it would probably provoke from an apologist the complaint that we are too logical. When we just state that we are Atheists, we are superciliously described as shallow, impetuous, blatant, or juvenile. Severe and profound thinkers do not call themselves Atheists. When we go on to state, even briefly, the grounds on which we base our conviction that God is a myth, we are told that we attach too much importance to mere logic. We are intellectual machines. We are insensible of the emotions which warm the hearts and lives of more normal folk. If we were more normal and less insistent on logic, we should, pragmatically, see that the whole nature of man, and not merely his intellect, requires satisfaction. We should at least not be aggressive, dogmatic, intolerant, or ironic. It is only when his perception of the truth stirs his emotions; or, we ought to say, it is when his perception of the way in which millions are detained in untruth by interested clerical corporations and the progress of the race is retarded that he becomes intolerant (like his critics), emphatic, ironic, eloquent. There is, in other words, an Atheism of the heart. But it is not like the Theism of the heart which Pascal openly advanced, and so many desperate apologists are falling back upon: the psychological absurdity that "the heart hath its reasons which the reasons knoweth not." It is honest emotion directed by clear intellectual perception of the truth.

## The Wrath of the Smiter

A favorite poem of the gentler or more accommodating type of skeptic is Whittier's "I Saw the Smiter in the Wrath." If this were meant to be a criticism of Ingersoll, it were best forgotten. Ingersoll contributed mightily, as Paine had done in an earlier generation, to the emancipation of the American mind, while such men as Whittier, Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Howells, dis-

sembling their skepticism, did very little in that work of emancipation, whatever we may make of their other contributions to American life. One is, in fact, not sure whether some of these gentle skeptics of the earlier generation would be quite so reticent if they lived to see the result of their policy. They regarded the Roman Church, for instance, as a body of a few million devout and innocent folk who could not conceivably ever become a menace. Ingersoll saw farther, and the Roman Church of today, spreading a net of secret intrigue from Boston to San Francisco, from Washington to Wall Street, the richest and most dangerous organization in America, justifies all the strong language he used about it.

The radical fallacy of all these pacifists of the world of unbelief is to persuade themselves that superstition is just ignorance, and that the spread of knowledge is bound to be fatal to it. They persistently ignore the fact that each creed has tens of thousands of professional champions who live by it and are determined that knowledge shall not spread to their people. They resort to every variety of secret intrigue and open intimidation, libel and misrepresentation the ideas of their opponents, keep people bound to them by a comprehensively untruthful literature, arrogate a power out of all proportion to their size in the community, and render no real social service. They shirk civic duties like taxation and pose as the city's most valued representatives at every civic function. They have lost the respect of the great majority of educated folk, but they fasten their discredited myth upon the less educated millions and extort vast sums of money from them. They earn more liberal pay from their sourer followers by interfering with the tastes and liberties of millions who do not share their creeds, and they compromise or hold their tongues on the great issues of our collective life.

No one wants to be merely abusive, but we smile when we are told that we must not express our disdain at the doctrines these people impose upon ignorant folk or our indignation that they should do so. Untruth dies a hard death even when it is just a belief of no practical importance and not guarded by some powerful corporation. Religious untruth is the most tenacious of all, not because it has deeper roots in the mind—the recent rapid growth of Atheism must make an end of that myth—but because there are enormously more men and women living on it than on any other speculative truth and they will resort to any means, fair or foul, to protect their livelihood. I have so fully described their methods that there is no need here to vindicate these general statements.

At least, the kid-glove critic says, you betray the defect of your method when you dismiss the ministry of all the churches as unscrupulous, selfish, and hypocritical. We never make such statements, and it is, on the contrary, a reflection of the methods of our critics that they so constantly misrepresent us. Most Atheists have at one time or other met the ministers of religion who are quite sincere and unselfish. What proportion of the total body of the cler-

gy are of this character does not concern us. The general opinion of ex-priests, ex-ministers and members of clerical families whom I have met is that at least half of them are hypocrites; and I have elsewhere quoted secret assurances to me of active priests and ministers that this is true. But that is not the chief point that inflames us. It is far more important that every ministry or clerical organization, as a body, imposes injurious superstitions upon millions of people, makes entirely false claims of rendering social service, interferes as far as it possibly can with the lives of folk who do not share any of its creeds, and sanctions a vast amount of dishonesty in proclaiming its interests. It is a truism of ecclesiastical history that the most fanatical believers have always been, humanly, the most dangerous and mischievous, and, allowing for the change in world conditions, it is true today. The most learned priest in high official position I ever knew—and I knew him intimately for years and had no reason to doubt his orthodoxy—used to lie fluently and unhesitatingly when it seemed to be in the interest of his church.

But let us keep to the broad view. The race has reached a stage when a drastic reconstruction of life is urgently needed and will clearly be enormously profitable. A bold and consistent application of science to every part of our life would in a few years bring about a transformation that is without parallel in history. We can by the scientific organization of the economic life, the scientific study and adjustment of international relations, and the scientific reform and integration of all the educative agencies which rigorously determine the thoughts and behavior of men and women, get rid in 10 years of the greater part of the suffering that still exists. Churches which distract folks from this essentially human and scientific task, churches which instinctively shrink from the ideal itself and nervously calculate how it will affect them, even churches which pretend to exclude all other worldly considerations yet cling to a mystic view of moral law, must be swept out of the road before this great work will even be begun. And when we see the clergy snatching at every pretext to ally themselves with the most selfish reactionaries and bitterest opponents of progress, when we see them using their wealth to get a corrupt control of the means of forming public opinion, when we see four-fifths of them imposing upon their people what educated folk generally know to be historical lies and repugnant old superstitions, we find our emotions are just as much engaged as our sense of logic.

## Atheism Not a Religion

Modern Atheism is a very different thing from the old type of freethought. We do not mouth rhetoric about "the sacredness of Truth" or "breaking the shackles of Superstition" or "the best of all Causes." Too often those were just meal-tickets or means of raising the price of a drink. Atheism



is now part of the grave plan of ridding life of its last medieval stupidities. We have seen 150 years of advance and recoil, revolution and reaction. This was due merely to the brutal violence used by reactionaries but to confusion of mind and conflict of ideals amongst the progressiveness and the intrigues of the churches with whichever party (usually the party that had guns or the price of them) promised success. We want a clean sweep of this sort of thing. We want men and women conscious that this is the only life they will ever know and that the one power that has shown its ability to help is science.

This is so far true that some phrase-maker of the clerical world started the cry that Atheism has become a religion, and the cry has been astonishingly repeated. As it makes a mockery of what nine people out of 10 call religion, we ought to smile, but in one respect it is mischievous and we must kill it by ridicule. Ever since Auguste Comte founded a Religion of Humanity, people have been giving new meaning to the word religion. Positivism is dead, but there are new forms of religion without God. I know numbers of excellent folk who sincerely feel that to make a "religion" of moral culture means a higher type of character. But the weakness of their position is that they are out of touch with the modern world and condemn themselves to remain a small aristocratic group even in a large city; that they almost always cling to the intuitional or esthetic standard of character and shrink from the idea of a strictly scientific and rational control of life; and that they almost always resent "aggressive freethought" and will not take the trouble to examine critically the historical record and the present value of churches.

Playing with the word religion always leads to weaknesses of this sort, even where it is not, as it so often is, a pretext for disarming Christian hostility. On the face of it, the logic of this new shibboleth, that Atheism is a religion, is on the level of childhood. You can't be soundly constructive without religion, they said. Then, when they saw bodies of Atheists doing finer constructive work than the so-called Christian countries, half of which fell away into savagery of one kind or other, they cried: "We see you are really constructive; therefore your Atheism is a religion." All this nonsense is part of the dreary plot to sustain the prestige of the churches and the wealth of the clerical corporations. It is a trick to conceal the fact that the experience of the last 10 years has belied half the literary superstitions which helped to maintain the power of the churches. One was that man is ineradicably religious and merely substitutes one form of religion for another; and we have seen tens of millions of men and women in a year or two reject every shred of religious belief and sentiment. Another was that irreligion invariably produces selfishness; and we see these tens of millions of Atheists cooperating with the enthusiasm which the old Crusaders are supposed to have had and had not, in making a new and better world for all. Another was that Atheism led to melancholy, to despair, to a feeling of isolation in a chill, empty universe; and we find now that it leads to exactly the opposite. We must not allow clerics

or mystics to distract the public from this drastic refutation of all their old claims by calling Atheism a religion.

## 6

# The Morbidity of Mysticism

Mysticism means, strictly speaking, a system of thought or belief which pretends to learn truth by other means than observation and reason. It pretends to have a sort of direct mental vision, usually called intuition, into a spiritual world that is independent of the material world or brain. As this superstition is now confined to a small number of folk in certain schools of philosophy and in such movements as Theosophy, it is, as such, not worth discussing. Now and again a novelist or essayist slips it into his text and tries to dupe his readers into thinking that it is a sign of a superior mind to wonder if there is not "something in it," and whether the "sages of all ages" can have been altogether wrong. Some philosophers also still cling to the antiquated belief in "intuition" and pose as superior to mere scientists. That arch-sophist, Dr. C.E.M. Joad, in a recent plea notices our objection that philosophers have never discovered anything which they all agree to be an important truth, and he makes the singular defense that philosophers have been at work for "so little time"! One would expect a teacher of philosophy to know that philosophy is older than science; that it was intensely cultivated in India and China and Greece centuries before the Alexandrian Greeks gave the world a modest beginning of science; and that, while fanaticism broke the continuity of the development of science and made long periods completely barren, the fanatics generally allowed spiritual philosophers to go on with their word-spinning. And philosophy of this sort is, like all strict mysticism, completely bankrupt.

However, the modern study of the mind has made an empty superstition of this supposed mystic power of vision or intuition, and very few people take any notice of it. I am here taking the word mysticism in the broader sense in which we commonly use it today. We call every sort of belief in a spiritual, transcendental, or supernatural world mysticism, and we very decidedly give that name to any reliance on moral intuitions. The normal modern attitude is that we are part of a material universe and we have an apparatus for perceiving it and drawing inferences from what we perceive. The bulk of religious folk, of course, do not base their beliefs on either perceptions or inferences. They idly accept the creeds in which they were reared

or bow to clerical authority. Ultimately, however, this survival of religious belief in modern conditions is due to writers who profess to prove, logically, that there are features of the material universe which compel us to believe, by inference, in the existence of a spiritual world, and it is in this sense we now commonly use the word mysticism.

## The Social Evil of Sophistry

If logic were, as some imagine, a matter of geometrically arranged syllogisms and chains of syllogisms, it would hardly be worth fighting about. But the scientific analysis of reasoning is something quite different from reasoning itself. A physiologist will analyze the act of walking or breathing and show that it includes a number of processes which would astonish the man who simply walks or breathes. In fact, it does not matter two pins to us whether the elaborate analysis of reasoning that is given in what are called manuals of logic is or is not correct. You do not need to know anything whatever about syllogisms to see that the man who claims that God exists because he has a firm conviction that he exists is fooling himself with sophistry. It is the popular fallacy of the "hunch" on a glorified scale. It is, in fact, worse, because in all cases that are worth considering in which a man claims to have acted successfully on a hunch he means that of two or more alternatives one seemed to him, for reasons which he did not explicitly and consciously consider, the more reasonable.

And that this applies to the whole of religious or spiritual belief we have already seen. The scientific believers and liberal theological writers who accuse us of arrogance or dogmatism in condemning their beliefs know as little about the matter as they seem to know about the history of Christendom or about comparative ethics. All their inferences from the order, beauty, power, etc., of the material universe are, and have been for several generations, condemned by the great majority of philosophers as illogical and useless. It may sound like the devil quoting scripture when I invoke the authority of philosophers, but I do admit that they know something about the value of argumentation or reasoning. They know so much, in fact, that they themselves reject as unsound all the systems of philosophy that thinkers have fabricated from Plato and Aristotle to Eucken, and they are now trying to work out an entirely new set of philosophic ideas. And if a minority of them still cherish the illusion that we perceive something from which we are bound to infer the existence of God, the rest retort that their logic is as unsound as that of ordinary Theists.

We have seen all this in detail. I recall it only because it exposes the nonsense of those who accuse Atheists of being illogical or of presumption in their indictment of Theism. In plain fact the structure of thought which, tak-

ing the thesis and the arguments together, we call Theism is like a crumbling medieval ruin. It was built up in the 13th Century, when Thomas Aquinas and other Schoolmen had to get together, borrowing from Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, etc., a rational defense of the belief in God and the immortal soul. Two hundred years ago the legend of immortality was beginning to disclose its childishness, but practically the whole educated world was still united in thinking the theistic part of the structure solid and as enduring as the hills. Within half a century Atheism and the timid rejection of Theism which is known as Pantheism spreads rapidly among educated folk. But we need not tell the story here. As compared with the days of Voltaire, the structure of Theism is in the condition of a medieval ruin: not one of those formidable castles which we can patch and retain in some semblance of solidity, but one of those roofless ruined abbeys which disintegrate year by year. It would cease to exist in a few decades if, as in Russia, the public were protected against the deceitfulness of paid servants of the system and were taught the truth about them.

Argument for the existence of God is, in fact, as we have seen, now so chaotic and contradictory, so confident only where there is the least culture and so feeble in the educated class of Theists, that it is a common-sense conclusion that obviously there is no God at the back of the business. In a sense the arguments are not for the purpose of proving the existence of God but for the purpose of persuading some millions to remain in the churches. And the fact that interested sophistry of this kind is a grave social evil ought not to require such proof. The supreme need of the present century is clear, realistic thinking. The splendid campaign of humanitarians in the last century had brought about a very considerable change of emotional attitude. The glorification of war and callousness to social injustice which had grown up in and persisted throughout the Christian era—for the later Greeks and Romans had got beyond that barbaric phase—had been generally discredited. The normal attitude at the beginning of this century, which opened with the Hague Conference and the rapid spread of social legislation, was to seek a sound means of making an end of war, poverty, and political corruption or domination. No one then suspected that within 30 years science would come to the aid of this humanitarian aspiration by making production so fruitful that we could now provide comfort for all. When this fact was at last realized, the race had the most wonderful opportunity of advance that it has ever had.

The appalling blunders by which our generation has forfeited this opportunity prove the truth of what I have said: that the supreme need is clear, realistic thinking on the part of the general public. The recrudescence of savage medieval sentiment itself is due to the ease with which neurotic orators and leaders of truculent bands of Fascist brigands were able to dupe the public. The way in which men like Hitler and Mussolini have won power is exactly on a par with the proceedings of preachers, especially of the revivalist type.

It is quite easy for any orator or writer to show that any particular country or the whole world is in a rotten condition. The rational attitude to this truth is that in point of historical fact the world is in most respects better than it ever was before; that if we cling loyally to the agencies—education and humanitarian idealism—which made it better we shall continue to reduce its rottenness, and that the gravest menace to our progress is to make any concessions to the reactionary forces—church, state, and army—that use powerful organization to keep the world as it is.

But to maintain this attitude a man needs to be well informed, cool in judgment, suspicious of rhetoric and verbiage. Those are exactly the opposite of the qualities upon which the mysticism-monger relies. He, as a rule, hates science and exact knowledge, and he is an artist in the use of meaningless or seductive verbiage. Except in a country such as Italy, where Mussolini has infamously handed over all primary and secondary education to the Pope in return for the Pope's support of his criminality, it would be absurd today to throw all the blame for illogicality of the public upon the churches. They directly influence only a minority, from one-third to one-fifth of the community, but, if we consider the intellectual value of this influence, it is socially evil since it is based upon a deliberate cultivation of sophistry and debauching of the judgment, and this evil influence is greatly extended by the favor that is shown to the churches, as a reward for their support of reaction generally, by the education authorities, the press, radio organizations, etc. The demoralizing sophistry of the ecclesiastical world is spread through the intellectual environment of the entire community, and this is done for the express reason that it is recognized to be "the opium of the people." The powers that rule, or exploit, our muddled world do not want clear, realistic thinking. That is the real reason for the maintenance of the prejudice against clean-cut, logical Atheism.

## Effects of Mental Constipation

I have in an earlier number shown how a drastic and explicit Atheism has exactly the opposite effect upon the public mind to that which I here ascribe to mysticism and need not pursue the matter. Here I may conclude with a more concrete and practical consideration of the matter. Our blunt age has begun to use the expression "mental constipation." It greatly offends many parsons, and they would doubtless be as horrified as they would be surprised if someone were permitted to translate literally for them the much less refined language of Martin Luther; and for the Catholic apostle of refinement he might add a translation of some of the expressions used by Luther's monk-opponents. I can't say that I like the phrase or am in the habit of using it, but the very common practice of writers, large numbers of whom in private

ridicule both Christianity and Theism, who attribute a good influence (on the other guy of course) to religion and talk about our spiritual interests, disposes one to use strong language when it is pertinent.

The evil of constipation is that waste matter which ought to be discharged remains in the organs and poisons the blood, the tissues, and the whole life of the body. And I go so far as to say that the support which is given to religious superstitions by this talk about our spiritual interests and the refining influence of religion deserves to be described as an effect of mental constipation. One is at first inclined to distinguish and admit the existence of many writers who are entirely sincere in this outside support of religion on the ground of spiritual interests. Yes, sincere, but utterly and culpably superficial. The non-theistic moralist who continues to write of Atheism or Materialism as endangering the spiritual interests of the race is as culpable as the writer who continues to talk about some discredited "19th Century Materialism." People who perpetuate these howlers about Materialism and Atheism and then try to excuse their ignorance of the fact that we refuted them long ago on the ground that they never read us are certainly culpable. We have explained a thousand times over that if by spiritual realities they mean, as they do mean, mental culture, a love of art, and a decent standard of conduct, it is stupid to suggest that any Materialist differs from them.

But even these folk cannot be excused quite so easily. They do plead for something, generally in the way of moral intuitions, which we materialists certainly reject. And against their insufferable air of superiority I put at once a glaring instance of the social evil of their attitude. There has recently been both in Britain and America some extension to skeptical middle-class writers and speakers of the prejudice against birth control. Half a dozen women of this class have recently in London been urging the social danger of the practice of contraception. The allegations of fact which they make are so feeble that one knows that the real motive is the sort of "moral delicacy" that comes of the claim to have ethical intuitions. One of them has recently said that the decline of births in Great Britain is such that the population will in half a century be reduced from 40,000,000 to 4,000,000 and that of these 4,000,000 the percentage of men over 60 will be alarming. It does not occur to these zealots to check British experience by that of France, where, once birth control has become generally known, the population has remained almost stationary for 30 years; and as to the sexagenarians, I almost a septuagenarian, am ready to pit myself against any of these younger folk in any test of mental vitality or any volume of useful service; and I am not sure that I could add physical endurance.

But the main point is that all these moral and religious mystics flagrantly betray the social danger of their method. One of the most discussed questions in Great Britain today—doubtless there is some corresponding question in America—is the problem of "the black areas." These are industrial sec-

tions of the country where there is not, and never again (under the present "system") will be, sufficient occupation for the inhabitants, and they live in terrible distress. Now these are just the areas where families are largest, churches are most frequented, and parsons are most insistent on the wickedness of birth control. The main remedy is obvious: birth control. But not a paper in Great Britain, Socialist or Liberal, dare point out this, from the fear of churches, and not one of these amiable amateur sociologists ever faces the fact.

Yet this is a parochial evil compared with the poisoning of the international life of the world by this kind of mental constipation. The world's will to peace which the 19th Century created has been thwarted by three powers: Japan, Italy, and Germany. War-mongers (generally in the armament business or the military profession) there are in every country, but we could have exterminated the breed in the last 20 years had it not been for the developments in Japan, Italy and Germany. We find genteel moralists like Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler making excuses for them, or retailing their own hypocritical cry that they are over populated and must expand, so that if other powers will not hand over colonies to them, they are forced into aggression. And before our eyes, for more than 10 years in Italy and Japan and for several years in Germany (and Poland, which is the fourth menace), statesmen have been deliberately and frantically forcing up the birth rate for the express purpose of having an excuse for aggressive war. Respectable heads of universities suavely blessed the "spiritual reconciliation" of the Pope and the Butcher [Mussolini]; it was going to promote the spiritual interests of Italy which were endangered by Socialism and Communism. Respectable ladies—liberals, of course—protested against the advertising in respectable papers of these Haldeman-Julius publications. Now they try hard to close their eyes to the truth. We were right from the start and all the way through.

The important point is, not that we were right and our critics wrong, but that these mystically minded folk were forced by their mysticism to make the blunder they did. And this is only one illustration out of many that could be given. Take the problem of morals as a whole. It is very largely because mystics hang on to old-fashioned and intellectually discredited ideas, because it gives them the luxury of feeling far superior to the rest of us, that the modern world has become dangerously confused about what is from a scientific viewpoint a comparatively simple matter, its code of individual and social behavior. Just because these folk who are welcomed in the press, which excludes us, insist on their old moral intuitions, the word "moral" begins to make men bilious, and sound rules of conduct are comprised with unsound in a vague feeling of superiority to superstition. Prophets of the pessimistic type mix together, in indicting our age, developments which are perfectly sound and healthy expressions of our scientific mastery of life with real errors and dangers. It is morbid, stupid, and socially poisonous, and it is in



every case due to some vein of mysticism that lingers even in men and women who call God a myth and Christian theology a piece of stupidity. But we have had enough of arguing about these matters.

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